



Idaho Senator Larry Craig:

VETERANS LINK

ISSUE UPDATE



This is a periodic report from Washington on issues affecting veterans in Idaho. As one of only two Senators who sit on both the authorizing and appropriating committees for veterans, I wanted to take a minute and update you on legislation and issues under consideration in those committees and the U.S. Senate.

Larry E. Craig, U.S. Senator

Senator Craig Meets with VA Deputy Secretary to Discuss VA Doctors and Concurrent Receipt Funding

Senator Craig met with Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA), Leo Mackay on March 6, 2002, to discuss Idaho priorities. Among the issues discussed were health care options for veterans, the hiring of an additional doctor to serve veterans in the Pocatello area, and bringing a new pilot program to the state.

Mackay and Craig also discussed the issue of concurrent receipt, an initiative that would permit retired members of the Armed Forces who have a service-connected disability to receive military retired pay concurrently with veterans' disability compensation.

Currently, Craig is seeking funding for concurrent re-

ceipt of military retired pay and veterans' disability compensation. Craig and others have sent a letter to the Senate Budget Committee, requesting funding for concurrent receipt in the budget resolution for fiscal year 2003.

Finally, Craig asked Deputy Secretary Mackay to bring to Idaho a new pilot program underway in California. The program distributes a desk reference manual of medical advice to veterans that can provide a quick and convenient guide to help them identify health problems and obtain the most effective treatment. The reference manual is published by the Boise-based non-profit company Healthwise.

The War on Terror Update

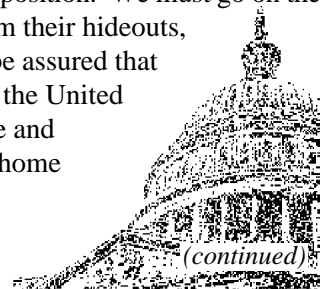
Our war on terror, known as "Operation Enduring Freedom," has had great success in routing terrorists and terror organizations from Afghanistan. This is a different kind of war with a different kind of enemy, but our armed forces have clearly adjusted; five months after this operation began on October 7, 2001, the American flag now flies over the embassy in Kabul.

During the war in Afghanistan the United States has committed fewer than 3,000 troops while destroying 11 terrorist training camps and 39 Taliban command and control sites. In addition, we have dropped more than 2.5 million humanitarian rations to aid the Afghanistan people.

While we have virtually eliminated terrorists from Afghanistan, the war on terror is far from over. I support President

Bush's decision and efforts to extend this war on terror to countries and regimes who harbor and support terrorists. If we fail to act now, these terrorists will regroup, reorganize, and wreak havoc on the United States and our allies.

As the most free and open society in the world, we cannot win this war on terror from a defensive position. We must go on the offensive, smoke the terrorists from their hideouts, and eliminate their threat. Please be assured that I will not wait for danger to strike the United States; instead, I will be pro-active and support all necessary measures at home and abroad to ensure the safety of this nation.



Concurrent Receipt Issue

Many veterans will be pleased to know that two concurrent receipt provisions were included in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2002, which passed with my support. The first provision would allow concurrent receipt if the President submits authorizing legislation and Congress passes this legislation as part of the Department of Defense budget. The second provision, triggered if the President does not submit authorizing legislation, would broaden the scope of "special compensation" for severely disabled retirees.

This "special compensation," established by previous legislation, amounts to de facto concurrent receipt for severely disabled military retirees. These earlier Acts authorized monthly payments of \$100 to \$300 depending on the determined amount of VA disability for military retirees. You may be interested to know that about 20,000 retirees qualified for these special payments under the prior law.

While I supported the National Defense Authorization Act which contained concurrent receipt provisions, I was concerned about the impact of concurrent receipt on the Department of Defense budget.

However, it now looks like Congress intends to fund concurrent receipt. I will work with Congress and Idaho veterans in finding ways to fund concurrent receipt so its impact on the active DoD budget does not restrict our current or future military personnel or their families from being a part of the strongest military in the world.

Point of Interest

Section 1062, the "demilitarization provision"

Many Idaho veterans contacted me about Section 1062, the "demilitarization provision" or the "warbird provision" included in the Senate version of the Department of Defense authorization bill, which would make it illegal to possess surplus military equipment formerly owned by the DoD. If this provision had been enacted, it would have allowed federal agents to approach groups and individuals who own or collect WWII and Vietnam memorabilia and confiscate this property.

I was advised by members and staff of the Senate Armed Services Committee not to raise this issue on the Senate floor but instead work with House and Senate conferees to get the language stripped from any final House-Senate conference version of the bill. Acting on that advice, I joined twelve of my colleagues in signing a letter to Armed Services Committee Chairman Levin and Ranking Member Warner, requesting that Section 1062 be stripped from the final bill. We followed up with personal conversations underscoring the letter. I am pleased to report that this strategy succeeded, and the conferees dropped the warbird provision.

Congress Increases VA Budget \$3.187 Billion Above Last Year's Level

On November 18, 2001, Congress passed the VA-HUD Appropriations bill which increased the VA budget \$3.187 billion over last year's budget. The new budget for the Veterans Administration now stands at \$50.876 billion.

Total VA Budget	\$50.876 billion
Health Care Total	\$21.769 billion
Medical Care	\$21.331 billion
Medical Research	\$371 million
Medical Administration	\$67 million
Benefits Total	\$27.309 billion
Compensation, Pensions & Burials	\$24.944 billion
Readjustment Benefits	\$2.135 billion
Veterans Insurance	\$26 million
Housing Benefits	\$204 million
Department Administration Total	\$2.057 billion
General Operating Exp.	\$1.196 billion
National Cemetery Admin.	\$121 million
State Cemetery Grants	\$25 million
Inspector General Office	\$52 million
State Extended Care Grant	\$100 million
Minor Construction	\$211 million
Major Construction	\$183 million
Misc. Admin. Operating Expenses	\$169 million

National Defense Budget Increases More Than 10% Over Last Year's Budget

On December 13, 2001, the Senate passed the largest Defense Authorization increase since the Reagan Era. The new National Defense Budget is now set at \$343.058 billion for 2002.

Total National Defense Budget	\$343.058 billion
Defense Operations	\$317.473 billion
Military Construction	\$10.487 billion
Atomic Energy Defense activities	\$15.002 billion
Other	\$1.322 billion
Offsetting Receipts	\$-1.227 billion

Military Pay Raises

- Commissioned Officers' pay will rise between 5% and 6.5%
- Warrant Officers' pay will rise between 7% and 15%
- Enlisted personnel's pay will rise between 6% and 13%
- A greater proportion of housing costs will be reimbursed, as well as moving costs

The 107th Congress & Veterans: HIGHLIGHTS

Legislative Update:

The following are bills I sponsored during the past year that many Idaho veterans agreed with or encouraged me to support:

Senate Concurrent Resolution 44 - This resolution paid tribute, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of December 7, 1941, to the Americans who died as a result of the attack by Japanese Imperial Forces on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and to the service of the American sailors and soldiers who survived the attack. This legislation was passed by the Senate on November 27, 2001.

Senate Bill 281 - The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Education Act would authorize the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to construct a temporary education center to teach people about the Memorial. This educational center would remain open for ten years, after which Congress would reevaluate the continuing need for the center. This legislation is being reviewed by the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

Senate Bill 662 - This bill would make marked graves of certain veterans eligible for a headstone or marker provided through the Department of Veterans Affairs. It allows such headstones or markers to be placed at another area appropriate for commemorating the individual.

Senate Bill 781 - This bill would extend through September 30, 2015, the eligibility of certain former members of the Selected Reserve to obtain Veterans' housing loans.

Senate Bill 1088 - The 21st Century Montgomery GI Bill Enhancement Act would amend title 38 of the United States Code, to increase the educational benefits for veterans under the Montgomery GI Bill. This legislation would increase the rates of veterans' basic educational assistance for the years 2002 through 2004. As a cosponsor, I was very pleased to see this legislation passed by Congress and signed into law by the President on December 27, 2001.

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VA Patient Care and TRIWEST

As many Idaho veterans located in Southern Idaho know, it has been extremely difficult to get into the VA to see a doctor. Many of our veterans are being placed on a waiting list for 18 to 24 months just to see a physician for the first time. Equally troubling is the fact that many of our Idaho military personnel are unable to find medical facilities that accept TriWest as a medical provider.

Currently TriWest, the Department of Defense, and the Idaho Veterans Affairs Office are working together to help Idaho veterans and military personnel. In early April, TriWest will be holding a meeting at Mountain Home Air Force Base with leaders and representatives who constitute a sample of TRICARE users. Representatives from local military associations and staff members from congressional offices will meet to examine possible solutions to the health care problems of veterans and military personnel.



Senator Craig with Captain Ed Freeman and wife Barbara at the White House on July 16, 2001. Freeman was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

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Senate Bill 1090 - The Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2001 would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to increase the rates of veterans' disability compensation, compensation for dependents, the clothing allowance for certain disabled adult children, and dependency and indemnity compensation for surviving spouses and children. The Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs approved the bill, and it is now awaiting action by the full Senate.

Senate Bill 1160 - This bill would authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide a service dog to any veteran entitled to disability compensation who is hearing-impaired or has a spinal cord injury or dysfunction.

Senate Bill 1226 - The POW/MIA Memorial Flag Act of 2001 would include the World War II Memorial among the locations where the National League of Families POW/MIA flag is required to be displayed. It would require the POW/MIA flag to be displayed at the WWII Memorial, as well as the Korean War Veterans Memorial and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, on any day when the United States flag is displayed. The Senate Judiciary Committee is reviewing this proposal.

Senate Bill 1644 - The Veterans' Memorial Preservation and Recognition Act of 2001 would establish a Veterans' Memorial Restoration Fund to repair, restore, and maintain veterans' memorials. It would provide criminal and civil penalties for desecrating veterans' memorials.

Idaho State Veterans Cemetery

At the time this newsletter was being printed, the State of Idaho was in the final process of appropriating money for the State Veterans Cemetery land. Once the land is purchased, the grant application for the State Cemetery will be sent to the Veterans Administration.

Immediately after the grant application is sent to the VA, construction design will begin. Once the construction design is approved, construction will begin in the fall of 2003. A Veterans Cemetery is long overdue, and I want to commend all parties involved in making this vision become a reality.

*"Those who choose to defend
our freedom deserve the best
medical care available,
provided in a timely manner,
with as little inconvenience as
possible!"*

Larry E. Craig
United States Senator

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C.

OFFICIAL BUSINESS


U.S.S.